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FM AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0530

INFO RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 1126

RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE

RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 0053

RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 0057

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 06 DUSHANBE 000840

SIPDIS

STATE DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: DECL: 7/13/2019

TAGS: EAID ECON PREL PGOV PHUM TI

SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN - A/S BLAKE'S MEETINGS WITH PRESIDENT AND FOREIGN MINISTER

REF: (A) DUSHANBE 785, (B) DUSHANBE 345

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CLASSIFIED BY: TRACEY A.JACOBSON, AMB, EXE, DOS.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In Dushanbe on July 6, 2009 South and Central Asia Assistant Secretary Robert Blake gave an overview to President Rahmon and Foreign Minister Zarifi of the new U.S. strategy in Afghanistan and Pakistan, emphasizing the importance of Tajikistan in this effort. He proposed the United States and Tajikistan create an interagency structure to deepen bilateral relations, including security and counternarcotics cooperation. Blake pressed Rahmon to implement economic reforms called for by the IMF, and to reconsider the recent restrictive law on religion, which could fuel religious radicalism. He urged Tajikistan to step up efforts against trafficking in persons. Rahmon supported the United States' efforts in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but called for more infrastructure and for border security for Afghanistan's northern neighbors. Rahmon and Zarifi said the religion law was necessary to ensure order and prevent another civil war. Both spoke at length about Uzbekistan and water resources, blaming Uzbek President Karimov for thwarting Tajikistan's development. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Rahmon opened his first meeting with A/S Blake by expressing satisfaction with bilateral relations and asking Blake for his views. Blake thanked Rahmon for receiving him, and noted this was an important point in U.S.-Tajik relations, as President Obama launched a new effort in Afghanistan and Pakistan which better integrated civilian and military efforts and increased economic development programs. The United States appreciated Tajikistan's support for international efforts in Afghanistan, the quick response to our request for transit of non-lethal goods to Afghanistan, and joint border security and counternarcotics efforts. Blake said the United States wished to broaden and provide structure to U.S.-Tajik relations on a full range of issues, and assured Rahmon that he and others would increase the frequency of visits to Tajikistan to advance our relations.

THE EMOMALI SHOW

¶3. (C) Rahmon then treated Blake to his standard lengthy prepared statement:

-- Investment and economic cooperation would benefit the United States and Tajikistan, and strengthen regional security;

-- The global recession had a severe impact on Tajikistan because the country depended on world aluminum and cotton markets, and remittances from Tajiks working in Russia. Tajikistan's government was revising its budget downwards as needed;

-- The United States' Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy should be complemented by road and energy projects in Central Asia. The strategy should say more about regional efforts. Tajikistan was an important front line state, and deserved more assistance with border security and counter narcotics.

-- Tajikistan was ready to increase training with Afghan police and army, and to send specialists to assist Afghanistan. Tajikistan's proposal to host a NATO antiterrorism center had gone unanswered, and the Northern Distribution Network still was not using Tajik territory.

-- Tajikistan enthusiastically supported more troops in Afghanistan, but the United States should support Afghanistan's neighbors more in their struggles with narcotics trafficking and terrorism.

-- The United States should build another bridge on the Tajik-Afghan border, to encourage economic development.

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-- Tajikistan wanted more cultural and humanitarian cooperation with the United States, including a National Testing Center in Tajikistan with U.S. support. (Note: The World Bank is looking at this project as a tool to reduce corruption in education.)

-- The situation in Iran was worrisome. Post-election protests showed the Iranian mood had shifted, and that it was possible to influence Iran through support to "reformers." (Note: Rahmon publicly congratulated Ahmadinejad immediately after the election, and has said nothing publicly since.) Pressuring Iran on the election results would only "strengthen radicals."

-- Uzbekistan prevented regional cooperation, and President Karimov was to blame. Uzbekistan blocked transit trade and refused visas to many Tajiks. Karimov's position was "less and less understandable" on regional issues. Meanwhile, Rahmon had warned Central Asian leaders that soon Afghanistan would be stable enough to begin to claim its share of Amu Darya water.

-- Uzbekistan planned to be the sole supplier of energy and transit trade to Afghanistan, and it worked with international financial institutions to block development of hydropower in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Uzbekistan's claims that large dams in Tajikistan would damage its agriculture were an excuse for Uzbekistan to avoid fixing its massive water waste.

-- Pakistan, not Afghanistan, was the breeding ground of terrorism in Afghanistan, it is appropriate that the United States now recognized that. Tajikistan's security depended on the Afghan situation.

With some prompting, Rahmon stopped talking, saying it was "just an appetizer" for future conversations.

¶4. (C) A/S Blake said the United States understood the risk militants posed to Tajikistan, and is following this issue closely. The United States welcomed increased joint training with Afghans and cooperation on border security, and wanted to expand law enforcement cooperation. To justify a second bridge, the United States first wanted to see use of the current bridge at Nizhny Pyanj maximized.

¶5. (C) The United States sympathized with Tajikistan's troubles in the global recession; Tajikistan was in a fragile condition. The United States is the largest donor to multilateral lenders, and Blake urged Rahmon to implement reforms called for as conditions of the recent \$116 million loan by the IMF, to justify further assistance. On the political side, Blake said the United States, as a friend of Tajikistan, urged reconsideration of the recently passed law on religion, which restricted religious practice and could have the unintended effect of radicalizing members of religious minorities. Finally, Blake suggested establishing a joint interagency commission to regularize contacts between the United States and Tajikistan.

KILL YOUR MOTHER FOR A SACK OF FLOUR

¶6. (C) Rahmon made an animated but rambling reply to Blake's points. He dismissed IMF loan conditions by saying "we don't want budget support, we want investment and a regional approach to security and solving social problems." (Note: this is inconsistent with the government's constant requests for ever-increasing budgetary support from the donor community.) On freedom of religion, Rahmon remarked amiably "it's your first time here, Mr. Blake; I grew up here, and did not fall from the

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sky." The tragedy of Tajikistan, the civil war, resulted from Islamic extremism, among other causes, and this conflict set the country back many years. Freedom of religion was actually stronger in Tajikistan than in neighboring states, and Tajikistan had the region's only legal Islamist political party. Growing more excited, Rahmon said Tajikistan was on the front line against extremism, and must defend itself. Outsiders from the Middle East and Pakistan were supporting religious fanaticism in Tajikistan, but Tajikistan had its own unique culture. It was foolish to think anyone could transform Afghanistan and Pakistan into modern democratic states; the USSR collapsed because it did not comprehend the cultures of the states it ruled. If the United States had spent a small amount in Iraq and Afghanistan to solve their social problems earlier, it would not be obliged to spend billions more to fight wars there now. "An Afghan would kill his own mother for a sack of flour." The new U.S. initiatives in Afghanistan and Pakistan were good, but not enough; to develop Afghanistan required hydropower and irrigation, export processing industries, and jobs.

RELIGIOUS DIFFERENCES

¶7. (C) Blake thanked Rahmon for his views, and commented that countries most successful at dealing with extremism were those which allowed their citizens space to express themselves politically and religiously. This isolated extremists. However, Tajikistan's new law on religion restricted religious practice in important ways. Rahmon disagreed. He asked rhetorically, why did so many labor migrants leave Tajikistan for Russia instead of going to Muslim countries? Because they wanted to live in a normal country, irrespective of religion. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan supported recognition of the Taliban government of Afghanistan before 9/11 because they did not understand Islam; they were taken by surprise when Islamist militants penetrated their territories.

¶8. (C) Rahmon concluded by wishing A/S Blake "good health, steel nerves, and success." It was vital, he said, to support the central government in Afghanistan and "Obama must win in Afghanistan... there is no way back. We are your allies in this."

¶9. (C) Comment: Rahmon was engaged and in a good mood. But he hit the usual notes, insisting that hydropower dams were the key to Afghan stability, the United States should assist Tajik infrastructure projects, and that Uzbekistan was the root of most of Tajikistan's troubles. While Blake impressed on him the importance of greater fiscal transparency and political openness, Rahmon seemed uninterested in economic reform, and clearly not receptive to our views on political and religious freedom. He voiced full-throated support for our efforts in Afghanistan and promised that Tajikistan would engage in joint training with Afghan security forces - a promise unfulfilled for two years. End Comment.

ZARIFI -- BLAME EVERYONE ELSE

¶10. (C) In a 90 minute meeting just prior to meeting Rahmon, A/S Blake and Foreign Minister Zarifi discussed in more detail the issues Blake raised with Rahmon, along with other matters. Zarifi wholly supported a bilateral interagency commission to advance U.S.-Tajik relations.

UZBEKISTAN, NDN, AND HYDROPOWER

¶11. (C) Zarifi raised Tajikistan's nemesis, Uzbekistan, saying the Uzbeks wanted to control all transit to Afghanistan. A supply route through Tajikistan, however, would reduce the distance traveled in Afghanistan (and exposed to enemy attack) by 250 km from the distance traveled to Kabul via Uzbekistan.

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¶12. (C) Zarifi evaluated the situation in Afghanistan as improving overall; despite complaints about President Karzai, he had done much good for the country. Zarifi spoke regularly with Foreign Minister Spanta, and on July 30 the Russian, Tajik, and Afghan Presidents would meet in Dushanbe. Narcotics trafficking still threatened Tajikistan. Zarifi mentioned foreign fighters

from Afghanistan operating in Tavildara district, saying "100 to 200" drug traffickers, who had been living in caves, had been ousted from Tajik territory recently (note: see reftel A: embassy does not agree that these are merely drug traffickers, and believes the Tajiks are still negotiating with them. Even Zarifi commented, "Maybe it is more than just drugs.")

¶13. (C) On hydropower, Zarifi said Tajikistan wanted to implement the CASA 1000 project, but the ADB had delayed it because of the global recession. Zarifi saw Uzbekistan's hand in this, influencing ADB decisions to prevent CASA 1000 and keep the region, including Afghanistan, dependent on Uzbek power. Tajikistan was determined to build the Rogun dam, and the first power generation would begin in 3-4 years. Russia was a complicating factor; it was trying to sell power from the Sangtuda-1 station at a price too high for Tajikistan, so that the power would go to Afghanistan and Tajikistan would not benefit. Russia had to be kept out of Rogun to prevent a repeat of this. Tajikistan needed such large hydropower projects to support industries year-round; small hydropower stations were good, but only produced enough power for household consumption.

¶14. (C) Blake assured that the United States wanted to cooperate with both Tajikistan and Uzbekistan on the Northern Distribution Network and regional power integration. The United States would soon test a route by truck from Kyrgyzstan through Tajikistan to Afghanistan. The United States supported CASA 1000, and the ADB-funded 220 kv line under construction from Tajikistan to Afghanistan would give it impetus. Building large power stations required private investment, and the investment climate in Tajikistan was quite poor, as the problems faced by U.S. mining company Comsup showed. Zarifi said he was aware of the problems faced by investors, and predicted the Tajiks would eventually solve these problems. Tajikistan had good laws to attract and protect investors, but implementation was a perpetual problem.

ECONOMIC REFORM, COTTON DEBT

¶15. (C) Blake asked about implementation of conditions for the IMF loan of \$116 million, noting that the more Tajikistan did to strengthen internal controls and fiscal transparency, the higher the confidence of investors and multilateral lenders. Zarifi claimed to be out of loop on financial reforms, and complained that donors never told him about developing problems, they just came to him to help fix them later. Ambassador interjected that one serious developing problem was Tajikistan's failure to implement a cotton debt resolution by June 30, as the IMF agreement called for. The delay apparently was due to disagreement in the government about who would pay the debts; the politically connected cotton investors who used money illegally diverted from the Central Bank, or the Ministry of Finance (which, ultimately, was the people of Tajikistan). If the Finance Ministry didn't have the money, it would turn to donors, and the donors didn't want to pay. They were troubled that the investors who got Tajikistan into the cotton debt predicament did not have to seriously contribute to its resolution.

EMBASSY HARASSMENT

¶16. (C) A/S Blake raised recent MFA efforts to take land away from embassy control, to charge various new fees including for construction on embassy grounds, and to get a share of embassy housing leases. These irritants created hardships for the embassy, and distracted the embassy from doing its real work.

Zarifi said this was a general problem stemming from contradictions in Tajikistan's laws. Tajikistan was still a young country, and would eventually resolve these issues in accordance with law, but the United States should not expect to get everything it wanted. He commented that "we are doing worse to the Russians and Chinese."

HUMAN RIGHTS AND POLITICAL REFORM

¶17. (C) Blake raised concerns about religious freedom and the fairness of upcoming parliamentary elections. Zarifi made essentially the same points as Rahmon on religious freedom, and said the elections would not be perfect, but would improve on past elections. Tajikistan had to perform a balancing act on political freedoms; just in the past week he had received the Uzbek, Turkmen and Russian ambassadors, who had complained about the Tajik media's freedom in criticizing them, while the United States criticized Tajikistan for insufficient media freedom. Neighboring countries also criticized Tajikistan for having a legal Islamist political party. "Our neighbors criticize us for being too liberal; you for not being liberal enough. We have to find the "golden path."

OSCE HEAD OF MISSION

¶18. (C) Blake raised the decision on a new OSCE Head of Mission, noting that the U.S.-backed candidate, Shahrbanou Tadjbakhsh, had the support of the Chairman in Office and was the only candidate who spoke Russian and Tajik fluently and had extensive practical experience in Tajikistan. Zarifi replied that Tajikistan was considering the matter seriously, and needed a Head of Mission who could implement "real projects".

TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

¶19. (C) A/S Blake warned Tajikistan risked losing U.S. assistance if it did not show more effort on fighting Trafficking in Persons. Blake emphasized the importance of prosecutions and convictions for trafficking, including for coercing people to pick cotton, and to investigate and prosecute police and others who had raped and otherwise abused victims of trafficking. Tajikistan needed to appoint a new chairman for the interministerial commission on trafficking in persons, to coordinate efforts. Blake assured Zarifi the United States would help Tajikistan to do more against trafficking. Zarifi said he would raise this matter with the Minister of Interior.

WE WANT MORE VISITS AND MORE MONEY

¶20. (C) Zarifi commented that bilateral relations would benefit from more high level contacts, and suggested that Secretary Clinton visit Tajikistan and that the two presidents meet. He added that it was fine to discuss human rights, but Tajikistan first needed "something in our stomachs" and Tajikistan received relatively little economic assistance from the west. Blake reminded Zarifi that Tajikistan was the largest U.S. aid recipient in Central Asia, and that to justify high level visits and meetings, in addition to more assistance, Tajikistan needed

to show results in human rights, political and economic reforms, and trafficking in persons.

COMMENT: TAJIKISTAN'S WEAKNESSES

¶21. (C) Blake emphasized to Zarifi that the United States, in pursuing greater engagement with Central Asia, would not favor Uzbekistan over Tajikistan; the United States wanted to work with both countries on regional security. At the same time, he

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reminded Zarifi that Tajikistan needed to show progress on economic and political reforms, and on trafficking in persons, if it was to realize political benefits from greater engagement - such as high level visits. Zarifi, for his part, highlighted Tajikistan's internal and geographic weaknesses throughout the conversation, blaming Uzbekistan and the legacy of the civil war for the country's failure to implement reforms. He lamented the government's lack of staff with international experience, and consequent poor comprehension of the concerns of donors and foreign investors. However, Zarifi made a point of mentioning one of Tajikistan's strong points -- its wise and experienced President. Sitting next to him as he said this was the President's daughter Ozoda, head of the Ministry's Consular Affairs Department. She appeared bored throughout the meeting, only paying attention when the Ambassador talked about the problems of cotton debt resolution. The rest of the time she toyed with her jewelry and stared into space. End Comment.

PRESS ATTENTION, BUT OFF THE MARK

¶22. (SBU) After his government meetings, A/S Blake held a roundtable discussion with journalists. As has been the pattern since speculation began over the fate of Manas last November, the Tajik press were still most interested in bases. And once again, erroneous information popped up about U.S. bases in Tajikistan (ref B), despite Blake's clear and unambiguous statements to the contrary. The correspondent for Russian RIA Novosti asked for comment on the "victory of American diplomacy" given the Kyrgyz consent to allow the U.S. military to continue operations there, then asked when non-lethal goods would start transiting Tajik territory. In the July 7 issue the next day, Russian Nezavisimaya Gazeta alleged the Government of Tajikistan had offered A/S Blake the use of the Ayni airbase outside Dushanbe, citing a source within the Tajik government. The embassy denied the report in response to queries from local reporters. It is plausible that a Tajik source had made the claim, to use as a lever in negotiations with Russia, and this might explain the Foreign Minister's comment that they are "doing worse" to the Russians. According to the article, Russia and Tajikistan had signed an agreement about Russia's use of the airbase last year, but Russian refused to provide any financial compensation. The \$60 million annual price tag for Manas no doubt attracted high level attention. Tajik media also asked for comment on maneuvers by Tajik security forces in the Tavildara region, how the USG could ensure transparency in accounting for use of international donor assistance, whether USG assistance levels would change, and our view on the risk of extremism spreading to Tajikistan from Afghanistan.

¶23. (U) Assistant Secretary Blake cleared this message.
JACOBSON